

Evidence for LUHC Committee inquiry on children, young people, and the built environment

15 January 2024

This evidence is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) for the [LUHC Committee's call for evidence on children, young people, and the built environment](#).

Responses to inquiry questions

The experiences of children and young people of their built environment: How do children and young people experience outdoor spaces in towns, cities and rural areas across the country? For example, their streets, estates, villages, neighbourhoods and parks? How do these experiences vary across income, race, gender, age? How easily can children and young people travel to outdoor spaces and schools? How has this changed over the years?

1. Despite the benefits of high-quality and accessible green, blue, and other natural spaces, many children and young people are not able to access and enjoy outdoor spaces.
2. There is robust scientific evidence of the physical and mental health benefits of a healthy natural environment, including clean air, clean water, and access to nature-rich green and blue spaces. People who live in areas with higher amounts of green space live longer.¹ There are also significant wellbeing benefits to green spaces. People who are more connected to nature have higher life satisfaction.² Most children (88% of those surveyed as part of Natural England's 'Children's People and Nature Survey') agreed that being in nature made them very happy.³

¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26540085/>

² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25249992/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2023-update/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2023-update>

3. There is evidence that the design of built environments and green space interventions⁴ can impact obesity, time spent outdoors, mental health, time spent with friends, and child milestones.⁵
4. Currently, however, 38% of people in England, including children and young people, do not have access to a publicly accessible green space within a 15 minute walk of home.⁶
5. While 67% of children and young people reported visiting private gardens (own or someone else's) in the past week, followed by a park, playing field or playground (64%), only 26% of children reported visiting woods or a forest or a beach or seaside in the past week. No visits to green spaces in the past week were reported more often by children and young people living in urban areas (4%) than rural areas (1%).⁷
6. There are vast disparities in the quantity, quality, and access to green and blue spaces in England, including by income, ethnicity, ability, and region.
 - a. More than 70% of people do not have green space within 15 minutes' walk of home in a third of English local authority areas. In one in ten English local authority areas, 90% of the population have no access to nature within 15 minutes of home.⁸ The most deprived communities in England (as ranked in England's index of multiple deprivation) are more than twice as likely as wealthy communities to live in areas with a low amount of natural space per person.⁹ Residents of the most deprived areas across England and Wales have to travel 48% further to enjoy the freedom to roam.¹⁰ Residents of the wealthiest areas in England and Wales have 80% more paths in their local area than the residents of the most deprived areas.¹¹
 - b. A Black, Asian or minority ethnic person is twice as likely as a white person to live in an area in England which is most deprived of green space. Almost 40%

⁴ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-02318-8_17

⁵ <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/how-local-authorities-can-reduce-obesity/report/designing-built-and-natural-environments/>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1168372/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2023-update/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2023-update>

⁸ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

⁹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/what-we-care-about/expand-freedom-roam>

¹¹ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/who-has-access-our-paths>

of BAME people live in England's most green space-deprived neighbourhoods as compared to 14% of white people.¹² Residents in the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods have to travel 73% further to enjoy the freedom to roam. This trend is not explained by living in a rural or urban area – urban residents only live 18% further away from the freedom to roam than those in rural areas.¹³ The most white-dominated areas in England and Wales have 144% more local paths than the most ethnically diverse areas.¹⁴

- c. Data on the provision and accessibility of urban green spaces for disabled people is insufficient and this lack of information should be rectified.¹⁵ However, research has found that disabled people are significantly less likely to access nature with 29% of disabled people reporting not visiting a natural green or blue space in the last month, as compared to 18% of non-disabled people.¹⁶
- d. There are also disparities in the provision of public green space across regions in England. The regions with the lowest quality parks are Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, the North East, and the West Midlands, according to the State of UK Parks Report 2021.¹⁷ The Fields in Trust Green Space Index found that the North East and London had the poorest access to green space, while the South East of England had the best access to green space.¹⁸
- e. The UK Tree Equity Score, which was launched in December 2023, reveals disparities across the UK. It found UK neighbourhoods that are most deprived of income have less than half the tree cover per person and over 20% more air pollution than the least deprived neighbourhoods. It also found that UK-wide, neighbourhoods with fewest people identifying with minority ethnic groups have roughly double the tree canopy per person than neighbourhoods with the most, and experience 50% less NO₂ air pollution, 20% less particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) air pollution and are five degrees Celsius cooler.¹⁹

¹² <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/englands-green-space-gap>

¹³ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/what-we-care-about/expand-freedom-roam>

¹⁴ <https://www.ramblers.org.uk/who-has-access-our-paths>

¹⁵ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Mapping_access_to_nature_in_England_01.05.23.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-adult-data-y1q1-april-june-2020-experimental-statistics>

¹⁷ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

¹⁸ <https://www.fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index>

¹⁹ <https://uk.treeequityscore.org/>

7. In addition to disparities in the provision of outdoor spaces, there are additional physical and sociocultural barriers for certain people and groups of people, including disabled people and people with reduced mobility, girls and young women, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, to access and enjoy outdoor spaces.
 - a. The barriers are summarised well in the Groundwork UK 2021 report 'Out of Bounds: Equity in Access to Urban Nature'²⁰ and include inaccessible gates and barriers, lack of toilet facilities, lack of pre-visit information and accessible on-site signage, experiences of discrimination in outdoor spaces, poor design of outdoor spaces, and cuts to park budgets.
 - b. Recent polling by demonstrates that more than half of girls aged 11 – 21 do not feel safe when alone outside.²¹ Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls, a report produced in partnership between University of Leeds, Keep Britain Tidy, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Make Space for Girls noted the importance of female staff and officers, providing more than one facility or area for teenagers, including toilets as part of a café or other building (rather than a stand-alone facility) and providing individual toilets (rather than a larger toilet block) in creating outdoor spaces and parks which feel safer and more welcoming for girls and women.²²
8. Unfortunately, there is evidence that the overall quantity and quality of outdoor spaces in England is further declining.
 - a. Neighbourhoods dominated by the most recent generation of housebuilding (2009 – 2021) have up to 40% less green space provision (parks) than neighbourhoods dominated by late 19th - and early 20th century housing. The total amount of green space found within 1km of a development declines steadily the younger the housing stock.²³
 - b. The same analysis also demonstrated that people living in post-2000 neighbourhoods are almost twice as likely to report having no access to a garden, than those in developments dominated by housing from 1930 to 1999. If they do have access, they are 30% more likely to report that they do not like their garden.²⁴

²⁰ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/about-us/press-releases/80-of-girls-dont-feel-safe-outside-alone-with-over-half-receiving-unwanted-sexual-comments-and-attention-reveals-girlguiding-research/>

²² [Resources Hub \(greenflagaward.org\)](https://www.greenflagaward.org/resources-hub)

²³ <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

²⁴ <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

- c. The condition of UK parks is at its lowest since 2014, found a survey from the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) in its regular report on the State of UK Public Reports in 2021. Between 2013 and 2021, the proportion of parks in ‘good condition,’ as reported by local authority park managers, declined from 60% to 40%.²⁵
9. The decline in green spaces is for a variety of reasons, including:
- a. Lack of robust green space standards for developers in new developments.²⁶
 - b. Significant cuts to local authority parks budgets (an estimated £190 million from 2016 – 2021 alone), resulting in the loss of parks staff and skills.²⁷
 - c. Loss of core funding and capacity for local authorities, with core council funding has reduced by over £250 million from 2010 – 2021.²⁸
 - d. Short-term and uncoordinated programmes of investment, compounded by lack of local authority capacity, resulting in a loss of external income generation for parks (due to particular impacts from COVID-19, some parks estimated up to £8.8 million lost from external income in 2020/2021).²⁹
 - e. Lack of a strategic approach to green space planning, management, and funding.³⁰
 - f. Lack of coordination and join-up between Government departments, including DLUHC, Defra, DfT and DHSC. This is despite recent work on urban green spaces from the LUHC Select Committee, a 2017 inquiry on public parks.³¹ A Health and Social Care Committee inquiry could be useful to highlight the human health benefits and help make the case for significant action and investment in urban green spaces.

²⁵ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

²⁶ <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

²⁷ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/?LinkServID=6F6C3880-FBA4-259F-18889D4F13AC7765>

²⁸ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future>

²⁹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future>

³⁰ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/a_review_of_londons_parks_green_spaces.pdf

³¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1890/public-parks-inquiry/>

The planning system: How well are children and young people's needs currently met by the planning process in terms of policy and guidance? How are children and young people's views and voices heard, considered and acted upon in the planning system if at all?

10. The planning system is failing to create the quantity and quality of outdoor spaces in the built environment that children and young people need, as evidenced above.
11. Current national planning policy and guidance have not been sufficient to stem the decline in the quantity and quality of private and publicly accessible green spaces for children and young people provided by new development.³² This has been compounded by significant cuts to local authority budgets, resulting in loss of capacity and funding for planning advisory and scrutiny services and public parks services.³³
12. There are standards for developers and local authorities on accessible green space that have been in place since at least 2003.³⁴ While these standards have been recently updated and strengthened, unfortunately they are still only voluntary, and so will likely continue not to be implemented in most new developments.
 - a. The new Green Infrastructure (GI) Framework, including principles, standards, maps, planning and design guides, and process journeys. The GI Framework provides a useful set of resources for local authorities, other public bodies, and developers on why, how, and to what standard to deliver green infrastructure in new development and in existing developments. It includes multiple standards, including on provision of green space, quality of green space, and community engagement in designing and delivering green space. It also includes a standard on developing a local Green Infrastructure Strategy and setting locally-relevant targets to meet other GI standards.³⁵
 - b. However, the GI Framework and Standards are only voluntary. Lack of national standards or regulation is a major barrier cited by local planning officers in taking decisions and influencing the design of development, for example in the walkability of a development.³⁶
 - c. In addition, voluntary standards will not be effective in galvanising local authority action to retrofit existing developments to improve green spaces –

³² <https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/exposed-the-collapse-of-green-space-provision-in-england-and-wales>

³³ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/?LinkServID=6F6C3880-FBA4-259F-18889D4F13AC7765>

³⁴ <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/65021>

³⁵ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>

³⁶ <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/10520/walkable-neighbourhoods-report.pdf>

generally local authorities already want to take this action, they are limited not by ambition, but by lack of funding.

13. To ensure children and young people's needs for outdoor spaces are met through the planning system, the Government must:

- a. **Require, support, and fund each local planning authority to produce, implement, and report on a local Green Infrastructure Strategy, according to the Green Infrastructure Standards.** This would involve assessing existing provision of urban green space in a local area against the GI Standards and setting locally targets to progress towards achieving the Standards in new and existing developments (including 40% green cover and 15 minute access to nature). This approach would require local authorities to take a strategic approach to improving urban green space, identifying opportunities to improve the provision and quality of urban green spaces and green routes, prioritising nature-deprived areas, in order to deliver the most benefits for local nature, people, and communities.³⁷ A locally-produced strategy, with a requirement for public consultation, also provides an opportunity for local communities and people to have a voice to identify what green spaces are most important to them and how they should be designed and delivered. The GI Standards include accessibility, quality, and consultation standards, including the Green Flag criteria, which provide a guide to ensuring local people from all sectors of the community are involved in decision-making and served by the green space.³⁸ Local planning authorities should receive additional funding to develop and implement a local GI Strategy.
- b. **All public bodies should be required to contribute to the delivery of the local GI Strategy.** This will ensure key stakeholders and landowners, such as water companies and the Highways Agency, pull together with local authorities to increase access to nature.
- c. **Mandate all new development meet the Green Infrastructure Standards.** This will set minimum legal requirements on developers to deliver urban green spaces.

³⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/improving_access_to Greenspace_2020_review.pdf

³⁸ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>

- d. **Pledge £5.5 billion over 5 years³⁹ to local authorities to level up urban green spaces.** Significant and long-term funding is needed for local authorities to deliver the improvements to quality and provision and long-term maintenance of urban green spaces. A longer-term programme of investment is also needed, making green infrastructure more akin to grey infrastructure investment. Core funding to support resource-stretched local authorities is also needed.

Best practice and evaluation: Where are the examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people’s experiences in the built environment, either directly or indirectly, in the UK or internationally? How are these outcomes measured? For example, through economic or health and wellbeing indicators?

14. While not focused on children and young people, the report ‘A Natural Health Service: Improving Lives and Saving Money’ published by the Wildlife Trusts includes a model economic analysis of the resulting cost savings from health benefits to people from programmes which connected people to natural spaces.⁴⁰
15. Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls, a report produced in partnership between University of Leeds, Keep Britain Tidy, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Make Space for Girls, looks in part at the role that park design and management can play in making parks and green spaces more accessible to teenage girls.⁴¹ The resulting guidance is based on research by the University of Leeds from 2022, along with a survey of other research and good practice. The guidelines cover the following areas:
 - a. Eyes on the Park: The presence of other people can make the park feel safer; either through activation which brings in other users or making the most of park staff and other officials.
 - b. Awareness: The design of parks can make women and girls feel more secure in a space, helping them to see and be seen, ensuring they don’t feel trapped and giving them the ability to navigate their surroundings.

³⁹ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/our-cause/communities/new-research-reveals-need-for-urban-green-space>

⁴⁰ https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/23JUN_Health_Report_Summary_FINAL.pdf

⁴¹ <https://www.greenflagaward.org/resources-research/safer-parks-for-women-and-girls/safer-parks-for-women-and-girls/>

- c. Inclusion: How to create parks where all women and girls feel they belong by identifying and addressing the barriers which exist for different groups

16. A case study highlighted by the Safer Parks report was the Join Us Move Play programme (JU:MP) in Bradford, which has worked on making parks more attractive to teenage girls. Girls aged 11+ who live near these spaces have taken part in a series of design workshops, developed and delivered by JU:MP and Make Space for Girls. In Fagley, in the north-east of the city, an initial workshop was held with 13 girls to explore their experiences of parks. A number of themes emerged, including concerns about anti-social behaviour (especially fire-setting, quad bikes and public urination by boys/young men), being “judged” by others while in public space, and equipment not being suitable for their use. Building on the initial workshop, a second group of girls, most of whom lived very locally to the selected park, worked with JU:MP and Make Space for Girls to explore the type of provision that would make them more likely to use this particular space. From this workshop, a final design was produced, leading to the opening of the green space in June 2023, transformed with parkour equipment, different areas of seating, and wildflower planting.”

17. First launched by American Forests in the US in 2021, Tree Equity Score has just launched in the UK in a partnership between American Forests, the Woodland Trust and the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare.⁴² Tree Equity Score is an online map which for the first time shows disparities in urban tree cover across the UK shows how less affluent areas have fewer trees and are missing out on their essential health benefits, like cleaner air. The Tree Equity Score sets a goal of 30% tree canopy cover target which is then weighted by population density to enable progress towards achieving tree equity to be measured. By then combining information on tree canopy with indicators of income, health, employment, air temperature and air pollution, it has already supported neighbourhoods in USA to target tree planting to maximise the outcomes for local communities.
 - a. In one community, the Providence Neighbourhood Planting Program worked with local school children to identify and plant trees, who then were empowered to act as ambassadors in the wider community.⁴³

18. There is useful evidence and best practice from UNICEF on the benefits of urban greenspace for children, including evidence that having a classroom that overlooks a

⁴² <https://uk.treeequityscore.org/>

⁴³ [PNPP 2023CaseStudy FINAL.pdf \(vibrantcitieslab.com\)](#)

green space positively impacts students stress recovery and attention and participation.⁴⁴

Cross Government working: How does the relationship of children and young people with the built environment overlap with policy areas beyond the work of DLUHC, such as public health, transport, policing and net zero? Are government departments working together to address children and young people's needs in this respect?

19. There is significant overlap with policy areas beyond the work of DLUHC, including in Defra (the natural environment, air quality, access to nature), DfT (public transport, air quality, active transport), DESNZ (climate change mitigation, air quality, adaptation to climate change), DHSC (public health, social prescribing), and DFE (greening school grounds, outdoor learning, green skills, nature-based curriculum).
20. To date, there has been a lack of coordination and join-up between these Government departments on access to green and natural spaces. This is despite recent work on urban green spaces from the LUHC Select Committee, a 2017 inquiry on public parks.⁴⁵
 - a. A Health and Social Care Committee inquiry could be useful to highlight the human health benefits and help make the case for significant action and investment in urban green spaces.
21. To deliver on the Government's sustainable development, health, levelling up, and environmental ambitions, including the access to nature commitment in the Environmental Improvement Plan for all people to have access to a green or blue space within a 15 minute walk, the Government must:
 - a. **Set a legally-binding target for access to nature** by putting the current Government policy commitment to provide access to high quality green and blue spaces for all people within a 15 minute walk of home on a statutory footing through the Environment Act 2021. A legally-binding target for access to nature would drive cross-Government action and investment.
 - b. This must be **supported by a national strategic plan for access to nature**, to set out how the Government will deliver on its target, including policies, actions, and required funding. This strategy should recognise the importance

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<https://www.unicef.org/media/102391/file/Necessity%20of%20Urban%20Green%20Space%20for%20Children%E2%80%99s%20Optimal%20Development.pdf>

⁴⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1890/public-parks-inquiry/>

of local government for the Government to achieve the target and provide the policy solutions and funding required to local authorities. The strategy must be cross-Government and cross-sector, recognising the multiple benefits of green infrastructure and the multiple Departments, sectors, and other stakeholders involved in planning, designing, delivering, and maintaining urban green spaces.

- c. The Government should also introduce **a statutory requirement for every child to have regular high-quality access to and engagement with nature within education**, through their curriculum and by supporting teachers and schools to deliver outdoor learning across all education settings.
- d. Finally, a rights-based approach, through **a new human right to a healthy natural environment**, including local high-quality green and blue spaces, could also help tackle existing inequalities.⁴⁶ This new right would require all public bodies, including local authorities, to recognise the right of equal access to nature and to ensure decision-making about urban green spaces includes all sectors of society.⁴⁷

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 82 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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The following organisations support this Link evidence submission:

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation

Bat Conservation Trust

Chester Zoo

⁴⁶ <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Out-of-Bounds-equity-in-access-to-urban-nature.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/environmentalrightsbill.asp>

Earthwatch Europe
Froglife
Institute for Fisheries Management
Keep Britain Tidy
Open Spaces Society
People's Trust for Endangered Species
RSPB
Seal Research Trust
Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
Woodland Trust
Zoological Society of London